

Ebook Users Speak! Analyzing Comment Boxes from an Ebook Value Survey

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Abstract: In late 2010 the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) Library participated in a global ebook user study conducted by Elsevier Publishing. The 129 UIUC participants performed searches on ScienceDirect in their research subject areas, which resulted in reading 2-4 ebooks per person from the Elsevier ebook platform. After examining the ebooks, the participants responded to a questionnaire concerning their format preferences, they completed a logbook for each ebook they read/used, and they subsequently provided feedback, including their estimation of ebook value. Qualitative data gathered from comment boxes were analysed to compare to quantitative survey results because while the survey showed very favourable reactions to the ebook format, the written comments were mixed. This case study examines how the technical aspects of access to ebooks affect user's attitudes and acceptance of e formats for research purposes and addresses the importance of qualitative research in a primarily quantitative study.

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Keywords: Text Box; Comment Box; Survey; Open Ended Questions; Ebooks; Ebook Use.

1. Introduction

User surveys with mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) often return mixed results as well. In this study, a triangulation method was used to determine which aspects of patron responses to ebooks are most likely correct. Three different types of methods were used: unobtrusive ebook use data collected from publishers (using COUNTER data), quantitative survey data, and qualitative comment box textual data, both collected from logbook diaries of ebook users. The overarching purpose of the study was to determine the value of ebooks to both users and to libraries. Previous research by Chrzastowski (2011) determined that both libraries and ebook users benefit from the ebook format; however, comment box data from the ebook user survey pointed to a mixed reaction to ebook value. This study attempts to delve farther into the survey data by examining textual comments responding to questions about the value ebook users assign to this format.

2. Previous Studies

Chrzastowski (2011) previously reported on a portion of this research and summarized a segment of academic ebook user research up to 2010. Courant and Nielsen (2010) determined that libraries can economically benefit from the ebook format because ebooks require a smaller investment in space costs, cleaning and maintenance costs, electricity and climate control, staffing and circulation when compared to print books. Chrzastowski (2011) added to these benefits by examining local cost/use data at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). As shown in Table 1, ebooks at UIUC are heavily used and their cost-per-use is extremely cost effective. The number of ebook titles purchased is growing each year, increasing by 9% between 2007- 2008 and 27% between 2010-2011; use is increasing too, but some of this can be attributed to the increase in titles available.

It is important to remember that local use data will vary and will affect other institutions' cost/use outcomes. However, a good case can be made for ebook value to libraries based on research by Courant and Nielsen, and local use data will serve to inform further cost/value totals.

Chrzastowski also studied ebook value from the perspective of the user. More detailed information on

these two methodologies is found later in this paper.

Table 1. Cost and use data for UIUC library ebooks, FY 2008-2011; from Chrzastowski (2011).

Fiscal Year	#Ebooks	Amount Spent	#Ebooks Added from Previous Year	Avg. \$ per new Ebook	Total Uses	Cost Per Use
2007	292,002	\$185,991				
2008	345,186	\$224,047	27,531	\$8.14	151,089	\$1.48
2009	411,364	\$204,678	66,178	\$3.09	251,273	\$0.81
2010	484,768	\$383,167	73,404	\$5.22	563,871	\$0.68
2011	614,203	\$732,725	129,435	\$5.66	709,944	\$1.05

3. Methodology and Results

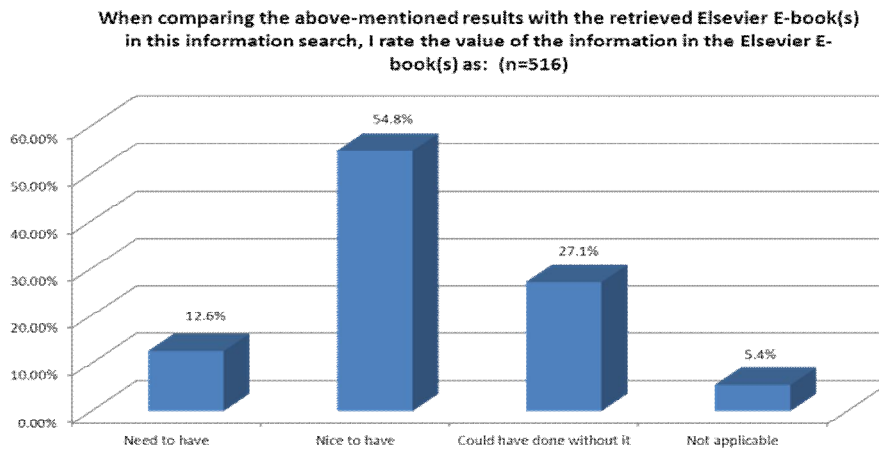
The three methods used in this research were 1) unobtrusive ebook use data collected from publishers (COUNTER data), 2) quantitative survey data, and 3) qualitative comment box survey data. Method 1 collected UIUC patron ebook use. For the purpose of this study, a "use" of an ebook was counted when a user successfully viewed or downloaded a section (generally by chapter) of an ebook through the vendor's portal, and this definition of use follows Counter Book Report 2 (Number of Successful Section Requests by Month and Title) for most vendors. The data are not 100% complete; however, as only 75% of our vendors were able to supply Counter-compliant statistics and only 33 of 40 (82%) ebook publishers were able to provide use data at all. This obviously resulted in an undercounting of total ebook use.

Methods 2 and 3, a qualitative and quantitative survey of UIUC ebook users, were conducted in fall 2010 by Elsevier. UIUC participants (129 faculty and graduate students) took a pre-logbook questionnaire, used Elsevier's ScienceDirect ebook platform, searched for and used Elsevier ebooks, and filled out logbook diaries and a final survey to document their experiences. Chrzastowski's (2011) research examined ebook value by employing methodologies 1 and 2. For this study, the qualitative data from the Elsevier survey were examined to determine why participants appeared to use comment boxes to report experiences that may not match the data from the quantitative part of the study. The comment box that received the most responses (435 comments from 516 ebook uses) was identified as the richest comment site. Comments were divided into three categories: negative, positive and not clear. Table 2 shows the top ranked comments provided by users. This comment box directly follows the question whose results are shown in Figure 1. This quantitative question generated a nearly 70% positive response to a question asking about the value users found in using ebooks on ScienceDirect. However, this comment box generated responses that were 45% negative, 36% positive and 19% unclear.

Table 2. Top six responses generated from 435 comments in response to the suggestion to “Please elaborate”. Figure 1 shows the results and the question posed directly prior to this open comment box.

Comment Description	Not Clear	Negative	Positive
Lack of relevant material	2	89	0
Did not have access to material	10	57	5
Did no better providing information than other resources	5	27	0
Obtained relevant/useful information	2	0	79
Would serve as a nice additional resource	0	1	13
Liked the ebook because it gave background information	4	1	39

Figure 1. Results from the “value” question posed to UIUC participants in the Elsevier ebook study. Nearly 70% of users found the ebooks they used either a book they needed or which would be nice to have, a clear majority favouring this format. From Chrzastowski (2011).



A more in-depth analysis of both negative and positive comments demonstrates users’ frustrations with technology, as well as their delight in finding the ideal reference at their fingertips. Nearly all of the negative comments (173 of 196 comments, or 88%) took issue with the irrelevancy of the material found, problems with accessing the information, or the fact that the search and subsequent ebook was no better than other resources (making the search again irrelevant). The negative comments can be summarized by this user’s statement: “I found one ebook here that my other sources did not find. However, the ebook doesn’t offer anything more than ebooks I found using other sources, so it’s not worth my time to search ebooks to only get one unique ebook that really offers no new information.”

It is interesting that so many users commented about being unable to access the information they discovered through the search process. The study made full access to ScienceDirect available to every participant, but over 15% of comments noted an inability to view or read the full-text ebook. If users in this controlled environment had issues with access, the scale of this problem facing everyday users is

easy to imagine. A simple way to increase user satisfaction is not only to make the ability to find resources a priority, but also to make them accessible. As one user commented, “While I trust that many of these books would be just as valuable, if not more so (than journal articles)..., it is difficult if not impossible to access many of these resources via the internet.”

The third-largest group of negative comments focused on the fact that (in some users’ opinions) the ebook platform used for this study did no better than other resources at providing access to information being sought. Comments in this area primarily compared the study’s search platform to Google and/or GoogleScholar, and found it no better or worse. Commented one participant, “In this search, my Google search returned much more relevant content (in 3 scholarly articles and a book) than ScienceDirect.” Competition in the marketplace means that users have many choices – and often select those either most familiar or most productive. It also means that satisfied users may be hard pressed to move to a new platform that offers them no significant improvements over their current favorite. Best for users and for authors is a finding tool that links to a broad array of sources, not just those of a particular publisher. And according to this user, “Many books chapters I got from Springer and John Wiley with our university access are also relevant to the subject; however, I think if sometimes having more than one kind of ebook search engine can help to complement some deficiencies of each search engine.” So some scholars are willing and interested in searching more than one platform and publisher if the results are sufficient to warrant the effort.

Positive comments also fell into three major areas: that the resource was in fact useful and provided relevant information; that the resource, because it was a book or monograph, offered a broader perspective and more background information; and that the information was a good additional resource. By far, most positive comments reported that ebooks worked well and produced relevant references in full text on demand. Noted one participant, “I was surprised at the number of relevant hits that came up when searching through books; pleasantly surprised, will use book searches in the future.” One participant also addressed the positive aspects of a Google/ScienceDirect comparison: “The ScienceDirect/Elsevier search retrieved only 10 results but a greater number of them were pertinent (i.e., what I was looking for). Google obviously didn’t weed out irrelevant results for me and required a lot more hunting on my part in order to track titles/resources down.”

“Not clear” comments were just that: not clear about whether the remarks were positive, negative or both. Many times respondents made both negative and positive comments, making it harder to classify. For example, one participant wrote, “The book I found will provide some good information for me, but was not essential.” Many of the “not clear” comments were also just comments, such as, “Journal articles are also shown in the search results.” Most “not clear” comments were too hard to classify as either positive or negative and therefore were added to these categories.

4. Conclusions

Chrzastowski’s (2011) research found that ebooks provide good financial value for libraries and that library ebook users hold ebooks in esteem. For libraries, and as documented by Courant and Nielsen (2010), ebooks are less expensive to own, circulate, maintain and preserve than print books. Cost/use data from UIUC have shown that ebooks are also cost-effective purchases for libraries. For patrons, ebooks offer the value of accessibility, availability (24/7), portability and search and navigation capability that enhances access. In quantitative responses, ebook users were overwhelmingly positive about the value of ebooks (with nearly 70% reporting the ebooks they used were either needed or would be nice to access).

However, this study looked more closely at qualitative comment boxes that directly followed survey participant’s quantitative responses to ebook value questions. Despite the positive quantitative response, comments were found to be 45% negative, 36% positive and 19% not clear.

Survey participants reported that, despite acknowledging the value of ebooks, there is room for improvement in the ebook format. Ebook issues mentioned in comment boxes included, but were not limited to:

- Non-standard downloading policies;
- Non-standard cut and paste capabilities;
- Confusion about availability and accessibility;
- Inadequate discovery tools;
- Other sources provided the same information in easier or more accessible ways;
- Content out of scope or out of date.

Why did survey participants share a majority of negative comments immediately after giving high marks to ebooks and quantifying them as important to own/access? Comment boxes offer participants the opportunity to answer the questions that the survey did not ask. This particular set of two survey questions was extremely broad, asking simply, "Please elaborate" for one comment box, followed immediately by "Your eventual other comments with regard to this information search and logbook." Both questions opened the door for participants to express responses to what they wished they had been asked, perhaps not about value or esteem, but about more practical experiences such as accessibility and relevancy.

Comment boxes allowed participants to express qualifications with their quantitative responses, and it is critical to the overall survey analysis to read and carefully code these data. What the qualitative responses tell us is not that the quantitative data are not correct, but that participants also wished to share their thoughts and experiences, both positive and negative. And, after analyzing the entirety of the survey data, we can learn a great deal from these ebook users. They value and esteem ebooks, but they also want us to realize current ebook limitations and work to correct the problems.

Overall, the conclusions from this ebook study, incorporating all the three methodologies, are good news for libraries. They point to outcomes that many libraries are already focused on, namely improving ebook collections in scope, number and discipline (to address the relevancy issues) and addressing access and technological issues by creating standards for downloading, cut and paste capabilities, indexing and linking. These are not easy tasks, but it's good to know that our users are just as aware of the distance we still have to go in order to migrate more cohesively and completely to ebooks.

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